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Baha'i Internet Agency

The **Bahá'i Internet Agency** states on its website that it "assists the global Bahá'í community in its use of the Internet, providing technical support to Bahá'í institutions and supporting promising initiatives of individuals. Established in 2004 by the Universal House of Justice, the Bahá'í Internet Agency operates under the guidance of the International Teaching Centre."[1]

The decision to establish the Agency was communicated to the various Baha'i "National Spiritual Assemblies" in the following correspondence, dated June 2005:

> "Universal House of Justice, Department of the Secretariat
> 16 June 2005
> Internet Agency
> Transmitted by email
>
> To all National Spiritual Assemblies
>
> Dear Bahá'í Friends,
>
> Opportunities to spread the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and to make known to society at large the activities of the Bahá'í community have grown markedly in recent years, especially with the rise in use of computer technology. Following consultations with the International Teaching Centre, the Universal House of Justice has decided to create an international Bahá'í Internet Agency to assist the :Counsellors and National Spiritual Assemblies in addressing certain issues associated with the propagation and protection of the Faith as they pertain to the Internet. Operating under the direct supervision of the Teaching Centre, the agency is based in the United States, where it has established an office with a full-time director.
>
> In the months ahead, after preliminary preparations have been made, the Bahá'í Internet Agency will contact National Assemblies and provide information about the services it can offer. The Bahá'í Computer and Communications Association (BCCA) and the Security Advisory Group, which have over the years extended technical and Internet-related support to national communities worldwide, will :continue to make a valuable contribution to this area of endeavour, functioning now under the direction of the agency.
>
> With loving Bahá'í greetings,
>
> Department of the Secretariat
>
> cc: International Teaching Centre
> Boards of Counsellors
> Counsellors
> Bahá'í Internet Agency"[2]

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Baha'i Internet Agency Whitepapers

"The Baha'i Internet Agency has made available a number of new position papers on the theme of the Baha'i Faith and engagement with the Internet. Social networking, blogosphere and folksonomies all get a look in. We have linked the papers here on our domain."[3]

- Individual Initiative on the Internet
- Participation and the Internet
- Blogging and the Baha'i Faith
- Podcasting
- Guidelines for Internet Communication
- Understanding Online Social Networks
- Responding to Criticism and Opposition on the Internet
- Basics of Search Engine Optimization
- Building Internet Communities[4]

These documents (accessible in the resources section) claim to lay out a code of behavior encouraged by the official Baha'i bodies regarding online activities. Of particular note is the Baha'i Internet Agency's stated position on dealing with online criticism and discussion, given the activities of the Baha'i organization documented by Professor Juan Cole and Frederick Glaysher [5]

The document **Responding to Criticism and Opposition on the Internet** states, "As you well appreciate, the extent to which such technology advances the work of the Faith depends, of course, on the manner in which it is used. As a medium for Bahá'ís to exchange views, it imposes on participants the same requirements of moderation, candour, and courtesy as would be the case in any other discussion. Likewise, those involved should avoid belittling the views of one another. In this regard, the House of Justice has noted your understandable repugnance at an apparent temptation to use misleading and invidious labels like "traditionalists" and "liberals", which divide the Bahá'í community. To the extent that this divisive habit of mind may persist in the Bahá'í community, it is obviously a carry-over from non-Bahá'í society and a manifestation of an immature conception of life. If Bahá'ís were to persist in this mode of thinking, it would bring to naught even the most worthwhile intellectual endeavour, as has so conspicuously been the case with societies of the past. Most important of all, as with any exploration by Bahá'ís of the beliefs and practices of their Faith, electronic discussion will serve the interests of the Cause and its members only as it is conducted within the framework of the Bahá'í Teachings and the truths they enshrine. To attempt to discuss the Cause of God apart from or with disdain for the authoritative guidance inherent in these Teachings would clearly be a logical contradiction. (Dec 10, 1992 to an individual) We have been asked to advise that there is no objection to the conduct of a chat room…which appears to be similar to a fireside

meeting except that it takes place over the Internet. In general, Bahá'í institutions should not interfere with it. However, you may emphasize that, in their efforts to teach the Faith, the friends should refrain from engaging in argumentation and disputes, concentrating more on introducing the Faith to participants. (January 26, 2003 to a National Spiritual Assembly) The House of Justice feels that, when Bahá'ís are teaching in an online "chat room" and Covenant-breakers intrude upon the discussion, the friends should not feel obliged to sign off simply because Covenant-breakers are present in this virtual space. They should, however, refrain from knowingly engaging the Covenant-breakers in discussions and, in any case, should avoid being drawn into contentious or disputatious situations. (October 27, 1997 to an individual)[6]

"In general, the House of Justice has no objection to Bahá'ís' participating in public, unmoderated discussions about the Faith, whether those discussions take place in person or through some form of electronic communication. The wisdom of participating in particular discussions, must, of necessity, depend upon circumstances prevailing at the time. When, through such discussions, the Faith is attacked or erroneous information about it is disseminated, it may become necessary for individual Bahá'ís to actively defend it. In some circumstances, however, to avoid participating in argumentative exchanges, attracting attention to enemies of the Faith, or engaging Covenant-breakers, it will be more appropriate to withdraw from the discussion. While the institutions of the Faith may, on occasion, find it necessary to offer the friends guidance related to theirparticipation in particular discussions, generally this, too, is a matter left to the individual. (October 27, 1997 to an individual) Thus, if any participant in an email discussion feels that a view put forward appears to contradict or undermine the provisions of the Covenant, he should be free to say so, explaining candidly and courteously why he feels as he does. The person who made the initial statement will then be able to re-evaluate his opinion and, if he still believes it to be valid, he should be able to explain why it is not contrary to either the letter or the spirit of the Covenant. The participants in such a discussion should avoid disputation and, if they are unable to resolve an issue, they should refer the point to the Universal House of Justice since, in accordance with the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "By this body all the difficult problems are to be resolved…" and it has the authority to decide upon "all problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure, and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book." In this way the Covenant can illuminate and temper the discourse and make it fruitful." (February 16, 1996 to an individual)"[7]

Current guidelines are also given for conduct in discussion forums:

"**Discussion Forums**

- 1. Each forum has a slightly different culture and usually some sort of terms of use. Learn the standards of expected behavior before posting.
- 2. Do not feed negative discussion threads. Not only is this a waste of time, but also it has the unintended consequence of making the thread appear more interesting to visitors because of all the postings. Let negative postings die on the vine—do not water them.
- 3. See if your question or topic of interest has already been addressed. Long-term members can become frustrated with numerous postings on topics that have been covered multiple times.
- 4. Avoid quoting extensively from previous postings when there is no reason to do so.
- 5. Avoid posting statements such as "me too" or "I agree." These postings simply clutter the discussion forum.
- 6. Using ALL CAPs is considered yelling in the on-line medium. You should never find yourself in need of yelling. New people often turn on the caps lock button to add emphasis—don't.
- 7. Having multiple screen names and identities is allowed in discussion forums. While obscuring one's identity is acceptable, lying about oneself is not.
- 8. Pick a screen name that gives a good impression of you. On the Internet others cannot see you, so, to some extent, your screen identities represent you and represent the Faith if you identify yourself as a Bahá'í.
- 9. If you are running and/or moderating a discussion board, make the rules of conduct obvious and clear-cut. Be specific about guidelines rather than simply exhorting everyone to "be nice." Enforce the rules equitably. Nothing ruins a discussion board faster than perceived bias and favoritism."[8]

Monitoring use of the social networking site Facebook

In February, 2008, Matthew Weinberg, Program Director for the Baha'i Internet Agency, released the following email letter on behalf of the Haifan Baha'i administration (see Baha'i Faith). The letter refers to the activities of the "Covenant-breaker Martin Lavallee", a member of the schismatic **Orthodox Baha'is** and warns members of the Haifan Baha'i community against possible 'exposure' to this individual arising from contact on the social networking site, Facebook. "Covenant breaking" is a term employed by the Haifan Baha'is to refer to groups and individuals who challenge "the authority of the center of the Baha'i Faith", which in this context refers to the authority of the Universal House of Justice, and is considered "the most serious spiritual offence that a Bahá'í can commit. It's called Covenant-Breaking and is considered to be a spiritual disease and is punished by expulsion from the community."[9]

"28 February 2008

To All National Spiritual Assemblies

Dear Bahá'í Friends,

We have been requested by the World Centre to alert you to the current activities of the Covenant-breaker Martin Lavallee on Facebook.com. This individual administers the "Orthodox Bahá'is" page on Facebook and also has a personal page on the site. There have been recent instances where Bahá'í youth with accounts on Facebook have unwittingly accepted invitations from Lavallee to be a "friend" or to become "members" of the Covenant-breaker page. Further, as a consequence of the Facebook networking scheme, if an individual accepts a direct invitation from Lavallee or any other member of his group, the "Friends" list (with e-mail addresses) of that individual becomes exposed. In this way, those with insincere intentions have the potential to directly contact an increasing number of Bahá'ís, interactions that could pose a threat to the spiritual well-being of youth and other believers who are not deepened in the Covenant.

Each National Assembly will need to determine the necessity and most appropriate manner of discreetly informing believers of this situation in consultation and with the assistance of the Counsellors. In doing so it will of course be important to avoid creating undue anxiety or curiosity about the nature of Covenant-breaker material on the Internet..

It is our intention to provide more general guidance in the near future about how online social networks can be constructively and safely used by Bahá'ís.

With loving greetings,

Matt Weinberg Program Director Bahá'í Internet Agency

cc: Members of the Continental Boards of Counsellors"[10]

Monitoring of schismatic Baha'i groups and "Covenant Breaker" websites

The Baha'i Internet Agency also monitors the online activity of schismatic Baha'i groups, and groups or individuals known as "Covenant Breakers" (see above section). In correspondence entitled "Good object lesson for avoiding reading Covenant-breaker sites", Susan Maneck has responded to the issue of the avoidance of schismatic group's online material as follows:

"Dear Kathryn,

There isn't any 'clear' guidance on this issue but if you have suspicions you can always contact the Baha'i Internet Agency. They pretty much keep up with what is on the internet. There are 'key words' which are often used by these groups which help me to spot them right away. For instance anyone purporting to be a Baha'i who goes on and on about the "Throne of David" is likely to be a Jensenite because this is something they are obsessed with. Anyone referring to mainstream Baha'is as "Haifan Baha'is" are likely to be hostile towards the Universal House of Justice whether they are declared Covenant breakers or not. Remeyites use terms like 'sans-Guardian' and 'heterodox' to refer to mainstream Baha'is. Then, of course, there are people like Stephen who may throw these terms around without having the foggiest idea who they imply. ;-}

I would like to add here that if there are any questions people have regarding some of the material they read on the internet, they should feel free to raise them here. What I have *discouraged* is the posting of the URLs of Covenant breakers and those hostile towards the Faith or the Universal House of Justice.

warmest, Susan"[11]

Prior communication from the International Teaching Centre to Baha'i academics regarding Internet activities

In illustrating the coercive measures historically employed by the Baha'i organization in dealing with internet based criticism, Professor Juan Cole cites a 1996 letter to a Baha'i academic from Stephen Birkland, Member of the Continental Board of Counsellors in the Americas, written in consultation with the International Teaching Centre (the body currently responsible for the administration of the **Baha'i Internet Agency**[12]), stating that "The International Teaching Centre has asked me--with the knowledge of the Universal House of Justice--to warn you that your promulgation of views contrary to the Teachings was damaging to the Cause. If you were to resume in any fashion this course of action, the effect would be to bring you into direct conflict with the Covenant."[13]

Letter of Counselor Stephen Birkland to a Baha'i Academic: Imposing Fundamentalism as the Official Ideology of the Baha'i Faith

"Continental Board of Counsellors for the Protection and Propagation of the Baha'i Faith in the Americas

16 July 1996

16 July 1990

Dear X:

When I telephoned last May to ask for a second meeting to discuss in greater depth a number of concerns touched on in our earlier consultation, you indicated that you would prefer that I put these issues in writing. This letter, which has benefited from the comments of the International Teaching Center, seeks to respond to your request. As I explained, my reason for the proposed meeting was a desire to assist you in understanding how a number of your postings to the members of . . . [an] . . . internet forum you created last year were in conflict with the Teachings of the Baha'i Faith, and how their persistent promotion by you was becoming harmful to its interests. As you know, a special responsibility for the protection of the Faith is one of the primary functions assigned to the institution of the Counsellors.

While I have not archived your . . . postings, I retained a handful of them which seemed to me particularly inappropriate and disquieting in the context of a discussion ostensibly intended as a serious study of Baha'u'llah's Message. Copies of some of these which illustrate the issues mentioned here are enclosed for your reference.

Essentially, your statements convey an image of the Faith in which the Covenant, although it is fundamental to Baha'u'llah's Message, has little substance beyond a kind of nominal legitimacy and certain very narrowly defined functions assigned to its central institutions. The broad and unique authority explicitly conferred on the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice in the Writings of the Founders of the Faith is systematically whittled down to a point that would, if taken seriously, paralyze the ability of the Cause to carry out the mission laid on it by its Founder.

The issue is not one of your having views which may be incompatible with the Teachings. Baha'i life is a continuing endeavor to understand and implement the truths of the Revelation of God to which we are committed. Nor would expressions of opinion during discussions among groups of Baha'is, however misleading or objectionable some of these comments might seem to many members of the community, normally be matters that the institutions of the Faith would feel responsible to take up. What has aroused the concern of the International Teaching Centre with respect to your . . . interventions, and has disturbed many of your fellow believers, has rather been a pattern of comment that appears to reflect a calculated and determined effort on your part, in the name of detached scholarly discussion, to impose on the presentation of Baha'u'llah's Message a strongly held ideological view that contradicts the authoritative and explicit interpretation of Baha'i Texts.

When I raised some of my concerns with you during our discussions in February, it became clear from your many--and often vehement--reactions that this understanding of your point of view is quite accurate. Indeed, these comments left me with the impression that you feel no compunction in disagreeing with Baha'u'llah and `Abdu'l-Baha themselves when their statements come into conflict with your strongly held personal convictions.

The nature of the problem which your activities were creating for the Baha'i community were clarified when you accidentally posted to the . . . forum a private message apparently intended for a smaller group of participants, identified by you as "Majnun." You cannot be unaware of the sense of betrayal experienced by your fellow Baha'is, who had believed themselves engaged in a scholarly exploration of Baha'u'llah's purpose, when they read a statement which appeared to lay out a cynical "winning strategy" designed to use the . . . forum to spread disinformation, attack the United States National Spiritual Assembly, and bring the administrative processes of the Cause into discredit. Nor should you be surprised at the dismay caused by your readiness, in this same statement, to recognize a parallel between the activities of this inner group and those of the notorious Covenant-breaker Ahmad Sohrab. It was keenly disappointing to all of us who respected both your adherence to the Cause and your professional credentials, that you failed to immediately explain what seemed a disturbing departure from standards which participants in such a forum had every right to expect.

In a statement posted over a year and a half ago--and repeated this past May when you adivised participants that you were closing down the . . . forum--you explained with great frankness the beliefs that motivate you. Please let me be equally candid, then, in expressing my opinion that, if you were today to advance such views in support of an application for enrollment in the Baha'i Faith, no Baha'i Assembly would accept your application or regard you as fulfilling the basic requirements for Baha'i membership set out by the Guardian:

"Full recognition of the station of the Forerunner, the Author, and the Ture Exemplar of the Baha'i Cause, as set forth in Abdu'l-Baha's Testament; unreserved acceptance of, and submission to, whatsoever has been revealed by their Pen; loyal and steadfast adherence to every clause of our Beloved's sacred Will; and close association with the spirit as well as the form of the present day Baha'i administration throughout the world--these I conceive to be the fundamental and primary considerations that must be fairly, discreetly and thoughtfully ascertained before reaching such a vital decision." I regret the bald tone of this necessarily brief and constrained presentation of my concerns as a Counsellor. As I say, it seeemed to me greatly to be preferred if we could have discussed such important matters face to face, in an unhurried atmosphere of respect both for your personal convictions and the integrity of the Faith's Teachings. You are the only one who can know whether in your heart you do indeed believe in Baha'u'llah as the Manifestation of God to our age. Baha'i institutions do not have the right to pry into believers' innermost convictions, but they do have the obligation to counsel individuals whose dissemination of personal beliefs is doing harm to the interests of the Faith. The International Teaching Centre has asked me--with the knowledge of the Universal House of Justice--to warn you that your promulgation of views contrary to the Teachings was damaging to the Cause. If you were to resume in any fashion this course of action, the effect would be to bring you into direct conflict with the Covenant."

With sincerity and concern,

Stephen Birkland, Member Continental Board of Counsellors in the Americas

cc: The International Teaching Centre Continental Board of Counsellors in the Americas National Spiritual Assembly of the United States

Further documents from Professor Juan Cole's website relating to this and other issues can be accessed at Baha'i Documents

Implications of involvement in libel and defamation of critics on public forums

The BIA has been alleged to engage in systematic Gang Stalking of critics online [14]. Following a post made to the site, Baha'i Forums, by a user named "MrBlackSunshine", which implicated a former member, and long standing critic of the organization, Nima Wahid Azal, in a defamatory and libelous manner[15], on November 13, 2011, the original author of the thread subsequently stated that:

> "It is with some regret that I must, after so long, cleanse my conscience by stating that what Nima says below is true. I was indeed instructed by the Bahai Internet Agency to place material here as a deliberate act of slander to counter his productions. It is to my eternal shame that I have committed such an act, and I have found that I cannot, in good conscience, hide this fact any longer. So in order to free myself from the sin of this terrible act, I have placed a disclaimer here freely stating that this act was performed not by Nima Wahid Azal, but was placed here on the instruction of the Bahai Internet Agency. Likewise, I do not doubt that someone within the agency has also been instructed to hack (or use a Virus/Trojan) on his computer. In light of this fact I hope you review your decision to ban him and review his comments more favourably. Listen to Nima – he speaks the truth!"[16]

"Protection of the Cause: Opposition Sites are known to the Institutions, and action is taken where appropriate."

In a 2005 presentation by Glen Fullmer, Director of Communications for the Baha'i Community of the United States[17], Mr. Fullmer outlined the activities, responsibilities and strategies employed by the Baha'i Internet Agency[18]. During his talk, Mr.Fullmer discussed the relationship between the Bahai Internet Agency and "Protection of the Cause" and "Propagation of the Faith", highlighting the relationship between the Agency, the International Teaching Center, and the various National Spiritual Assemblies.[19] When explaining the topic of "Protection of the Faith on the Internet", Mr Fullmer refers to a slide which states that:

> "Opposition Sites are known to the Institutions, and action is taken where appropriate."
> "In general however, the best defense is a good offense. Individuals and institutions can create lots of positive content about the Faith to counteract the negative effects of opposition sites."
> "In some cases, an individual response can be even more effective."[20]

Members

- Matthew Weinberg- Program Director
- Thane Terrill - Director of Information Services at Baha'i International Community's United Nations Office
- Pedraum Pardehpoosh Representative

Resources and articles

Bahai Internet Agency Whitepapers

- Individual Initiative on the Internet, accessed September 12, 2009.
- Participation and the Internet
- Blogging and the Baha'i Faith, accessed September 12, 2009.
- Podcasting, accessed September 12, 2009.

- Understanding Online Social Networks, accessed September 12, 2009.
- Guidelines for Internet Communication, accessed September 12, 2009.
- Responding to Criticism and Opposition on the Internet, accessed September 12, 2009.
- Basics of Search Engine Optimization, accessed September 12, 2009.
- Building Internet Communities, accessed September 12, 2009.
- Baha'i Blog Survey - Pheonix Conference (M. Naeimi), accessed September 12, 2009.
- Cultivating the Roots Presentation, accessed September 12, 2009.
- NEBY Fest Presentation, accessed September 12, 2009.
- The Internet Perspective, accessed September 12, 2009.

Contact

Website: http://www.bcca.org/bia/

Related Sourcewatch articles

- Matthew Weinberg
- Baha'i Faith
- Bahá'í Computer And Communication Association

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3. ↑ Baha'i Internet Agency, Association for Baha'i Studies, accessed March 31, 2009.
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6. ↑ Responding to Criticism and Opposition on the Internet, accessed September 12, 2009.
7. ↑ Responding to Criticism and Opposition on the Internet, accessed September 12, 2009.
8. ↑ Guidelines for Internet Communication, Baha'i Internet Agency Whitepaper, accessed September 12, 2009.
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12. ↑ Bahá'í Internet Agency, accessed March 31, 2009.
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17. ↑ On a Baha'is on the Internet Bosch Weekend: And mandala meditation, accessed November 14, 2011.
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19. ↑ Photo of Presentation Slide, by Baha'i Views / Flitzy Phoebie PhotoStream, accessed November 14, 2011.
20. ↑ Baha'is and the Internet, Slide: "Protection of the Cause on the Internet", by Baha'i Views / Flitzy Phoebie PhotoStream, accessed November 14, 2011.

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This page was last modified on 27 July 2012, at 09:04.

This page has been accessed 4,891 times.

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